

Origins of “Um Yah Yah” uncovered at last

By David Wee '61

WHILE DOING RESEARCH in the St. Olaf Archives, I unexpectedly discovered the answer to a couple of questions that have long puzzled St. Olaf alumni, as well as those who have heard us sing the college fight song, a song that has inspired generations of Oles: What in Thor's name does “um yah yah” mean, and where did that inane phrase come from? The answers may surprise you as much as they did me.

I had long understood, along with my undergraduate contemporaries, that the college rouser was based on an old Norwegian drinking song, and that “um yah yah” was the refrain that preceded the draining of a hornful of mead or ale: “Um yah yah,” we thought, was a cry of convivial gusto and a kind of anticipatory clearing of the Nordic throat. Not so.

What in Thor's name does it mean, and where did that inane phrase come from?

The rouser, it turns out, is actually based upon the old St. Olaf Faculty Hymn, which legend has it was sung at the beginning of all faculty meetings. Apparently no one knows or will admit when this practice ceased, nor have faculty colleagues to whom I have suggested the revival of this custom rushed to embrace the notion.

Hagbarth Hardangerson '29, who knew many of the great men named in the Faculty Hymn (“They were my teachers”), claimed the faculty never sang anything at their meetings. Only once did she hear them sing — “The May faculty meeting in 1926 fell on the 17th, and they tried ‘Ja Vi Elsker,’” she told me from the Our Lady of Fjords Retirement Home in Chicago, “but most of the faculty couldn't carry a tune in a bucket, and they never tried singing again.”

When you read the refrain(s), which apparently neither the faculty nor anyone else could commit to memory, you will immediately understand why the original words were replaced by the easier-to-remember, albeit somewhat ridiculous, nonsense phrase “um yah yah.” ■

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ST. OLAF FACULTY HYMN

Sung in three-quarter time, as a waltz.

*We teach at St. Olaf,
We don't dance or chew snuff,
Our students are Halvor and Gudrun and Thor;
They study like furious,
Their minds are so curious;
We sure are a bunch of Norwegians galore.*

*Gulbrandson, Narveson, Huggenvik, Ellingson,
Amundson, Klaragard, Halvorson, Roe.
Fredrickson, Rasmussen, Tollefsrud, Peterson,
Skogerboe, Faillettaz, Jorgenson, Boe.*

*We teach at St. Olaf,
It's built on a big bluff,
The wind blows so hard that it causes distress.
But colleagues are glorious
And students uproarious
There's no place on earth that we'd rather profess.*

*Christensen, Sheveland, Gustafson, Maakestad,
Lokensgaard, Skurdalsvold, Wrigglesworth, Ross.
Rovelstad, Jacobson, Lutterman, Otterness,
Erickson, Gunderson, Iverson, Foss.*

*Thormodsgard, Bieberdorf, Overby, Gimmestad,
Kittelsby, Ytterboe, Hinderlie, Njus.
Ditmanson, Odegaard, Hilleboe, Anderson,
Anderson, Anderson, Anderson, Muus!*

“UM! YAH! YAH!”

Adopted from the old St. Olaf Faculty Hymn. Not only is this version fun to sing, you can dance to it, too.

*We come from St. Olaf,
We sure are the real stuff.
Our team is the cream of the colleges great.
We fight fast and furious,
Our team is injurious.
Tonight Carleton College will sure meet its fate.*

*Um! Yah! Yah!, Um! Yah! Yah!
Um! Yah! Yah!, Um! Yah! Yah!
Um! Yah! Yah!, Um! Yah! Yah!
Um! Yah! Yah! Yah!*

